

CILDO MEIRELES**Clandestine Art**

When asked in an interview in 1994 about his connection to his country, Cildo Meireles was emphatic in his answer: “Being Brazilian is more of an anxiety than a problem. Each time I started to think about what being Brazilian meant, I always ran into the impossibility of not being Brazilian. What can I say; there is no escaping from that imposition of fate.”¹

Indeed, Meireles’s artistic practice, like that of other Brazilian artists who lived and worked in the country during the military regime, would always, at least to some extent, be viewed within the context of his “Brazilian-ness.” He entered the political arena more than once with his work; during the years of the dictatorship he issued powerful critiques of the military regime with works that dealt with paradoxical situations, such as money depleted of worth, Coca-Cola bottles and subway tokens as antiestablishment tools, and installations with the potential to be literally explosive. Yet the artist was as interested in pushing the limits of conceptual practices as in making a political point, and he often strove to divorce himself from the country’s repressive regime. In 1970, when Meireles made his debut on the international art scene at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, he made it clear he was not an official representative of the Brazilian government and that

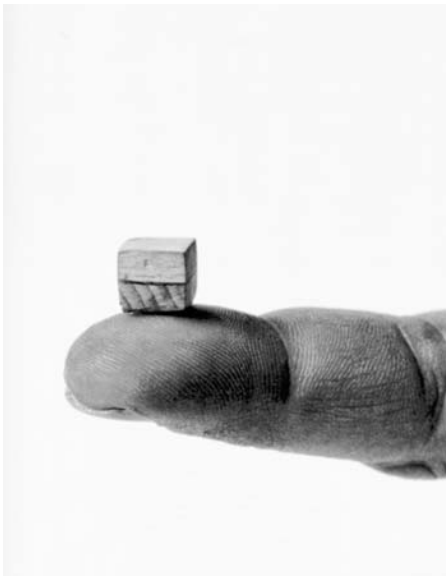
he did not support the military dictatorship in any way. In the catalogue for *Information*, he boldly denied any allegiance: “I am here, in this exhibition, to defend neither a career nor any nationality.”²

Meireles began his artistic career in the first years of the dictatorship, and his works from the period are marked by a searching for resolution between two poles: on the one hand, formally rigorous, conceptually based investigations of time and space, and on the other, strong critiques of the regime. Later on, his work would be in the eye of the storm surrounding the discussion of what constitutes conceptual art and how much the term would have to be stretched to accommodate artists falling outside its traditional definition—both artists working outside of mainstream centers like New York and Europe and artists exploring not only the dematerialization of the work of art, institutional critique, and tautological linguistic games, but also ideological and political matters, the physicality of the work of art, and its perceptual experience.

And therein lay the crux of Meireles’s artistic endeavors: Coming from a country in which censorship was part of the daily reality, what sort of art held meaning? Could a conceptually based practice still be politically cogent?

Born in 1948, Meireles is among the most acclaimed conceptual artists coming out of Brazil’s AI-5 generation; of the careers of the three artists discussed in this book, his is the one that became the most entrenched in the global arena. Though a native of Rio de Janeiro, Meireles spent his formative years (1958–67) in Brasília with his family. Designed by the architects Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer at the express wish of President Juscelino Kubitschek, Brasília was an artificial city, built in only four years and exemplifying the tenets of modernist architecture. Its inauguration in April 1960 signaled the country’s entry into the modern industrial era.³ Meireles’s parents were part of the first generation that moved to Brasília in 1958, before its official designation.

Meireles’s upbringing in Brasília gave him a poignant awareness of the country’s inequalities early on. Built on the vast plateau in the Central West region of the country, Brasília replaced Rio de Janeiro as the federal capital. The utopian dream of the planned model city was bitter from the first days of construction. Pockets of poverty arose immediately since the workers could not afford to live in the city. The planned industrialization was not followed by a social program for its inhabitants. The federal administration and political power became concentrated there, far removed and disconnected



41. Cildo Meireles, *Cruzeiro do Sul* (Southern Cross) (1969–70). Wooden cube, one section pine, one section oak. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Wilton Montenegro.

in every sense from the rest of the country, attracting much criticism. More an administrative district than a livable community, Brasília brought to light Brazil's social and racial disparities.

The plight of native peoples was a cause close to Meireles's family: his father, a government official in the state of Goiás, in the north of Brazil, worked for the Indian Protection Service and was involved with the Indians' Rights Movement. By exposing a government scandal involving genocide, he became one of the first people in Brazil to bring the murderers of a tribe of Indians to court.⁴ During the 1940s and 1950s the artist's uncle, Chico Meireles, was one of the first to try to save the Indians from inevitable extinction by helping them to gain control of their lands. His uncle's son, Apoena Meireles, also worked with Indians in their fight for the demarcation of their land in the 1960s.⁵ Their leftist ideas and social concerns would have a strong impact on Meireles's approach to the arts, especially his focus on minorities long neglected by Brazilian society.⁶

Meireles addressed the colonization of the Indians by missionary Jesuits and their misunderstanding of native cults and mythology in one of his early works, *Cruzeiro do Sul* (Southern Cross) (1969–70) (figure 41). The sculpture, a tiny nine-millimeter cube, half soft pinewood and half hard oak, is usually displayed alone in a huge space (ideally in a two-hundred-square-meter room), making it almost imperceptible. The oak and the pine are more than



42. Cildo Meireles, *Espaços virtuais: Cantos* (Virtual Spaces: Corners) (1967–68). Wood, canvas, paint, woodblock, flooring. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Renato Laclete.

mere natural elements for the Tupi Indians; they believe these materials have divine power. The friction created by rubbing one against the other creates fire, a sacred manifestation of their deities. The tiny cube contains potentially explosive energy, an idea that would later be taken to extremes by Meireles in some of his most emblematic works against the military regime.

Despite his natural interest in politics and social issues, Meireles's first artworks had a bent toward more formal and perceptual concerns. In 1967 he began a group of drawings that eventually evolved into *Espaços virtuais: Cantos* (Virtual Spaces: Corners) (1967–68) (figure 42), a series of three-dimensional installations resembling corners of rooms, based on Euclidean principles of space. Drawing on the artist's interest in mathematics, physics, and phenomenological ideas, the corners are investigations of time and space. In 1969 three works from the series *Espaços virtuais: Cantos* entitled *Nowhere Is My Home I, II, and III* were selected to be part of the Pre-Paris Biennial, the ill-fated exhibition scheduled to take place at the MAM/RJ in May 1969.

After the event was closed down by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS), Meireles's works were stored at MAM/RJ. In November of that year, having no place to keep them, he submitted the three works to *Salão da Bússola*—the same salon that gave an award to Manuel's installation *Soy loco por ti* and launched Barrio's career with his bundles created from garbage—as well as a number of other works that relayed or enacted propositions related to time and space. In a series of typewritten texts called *Fonômenos*, a neologism based on the Portuguese words *fenômeno* (phenomenon) and *fonema* (phoneme),⁷ he gave instructions for various actions the viewer might undertake: one suggested that the viewer go to the beach, make a hole in the sand, and wait until the hole was filled by the wind; a second instructed the reader to go to a noisy corner in the neighborhood of Copacabana and stay there, eyes shut, trying to hear the sounds coming from as far away as possible, concentrating on marking off a mental area encompassing the sum total of all that noise; a third text asked the reader to refrain from drinking water for twenty-four hours and then to very slowly drink a half liter of water from a small silver vessel.⁸ Another work, the installation *Arte física: Caixas de Brasília/Clareira* (Physical Art: Brasília Boxes/Clearing) (1969) (figure 43), documented an Earth-based intervention the artist completed in Brasília.⁹ It began with the demarcation of an area beside Lake Paranoá, an artificial lake on the outskirts of the city. The delineated area was cleared, and the leaves and wood were gathered in the center of the clearing and burned. A wooden box containing some of the ashes and the soil from a hole dug in the earth was buried at the site. The remaining ashes and soil were placed in two other boxes.¹⁰ As an impermanent action, *Arte física: Caixas de Brasília/Clareira* survived only through photographic documentation and physical artifacts: sixty black-and-white images recording the action, the two boxes containing the residue from the bonfire, and a map of the location in which the action took place.¹¹

Another work Meireles showed at *Salão da Bússola* was *Arte física: Cordões / 30 km de linha estendidos* (Physical Art: Cords / 30 km of Extended Line) (1969) (figure 44), a conceptually based work comprising a wooden box, a map, and a piece of rope. The thirty-kilometer cord, now placed inside the box, was once extended along the coastline of Rio de Janeiro; the corresponding map indicated the area it once demarcated. Like *Arte física: Caixas de Brasília/Clareira*, this work questioned issues related to the perception of space. Each of the works Meireles submitted to the salon—typewritten texts, ashes, cords—represent absent spaces. As they do not resemble the



43. Cildo Meireles, *Arte física: Caixas de Brasília / Clareira* (Physical Art: Brasília Boxes / Clearing) (1969). Sequence of photographs and maps; three boxes of earth. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Wilton Montenegro.

original places they refer to, they become disembodied, indexical signs, like those described by Charles Sanders Peirce.¹²

Compared to other works at *Salão da Bússola*, Meireles's works were relatively conservative, devoid of political content. Even so, he was awarded the salon's grand prize, a cash sum equivalent to six thousand dollars and an airline ticket to Paris and New York, for his works from the series *Espaços virtuais: Cantos*.

Around the time he was attracting attention for his perceptual investigations into space and time, as seen in his contributions to *Salão da Bússola*, Meireles's work underwent a radical change. As the military regime stepped up its repressive practices—by 1970 over a thousand instances of torture had been reported¹³—Meireles in turn shifted his artistic practice, moving



44. Cildo Meireles, *Arte física: Cordões / 30 km de linha estendidos* (Physical Art: Cords / 30 km of Extended Line) (1969). Industrial cord, map, wooden box. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Wilton Montenegro.

from his earlier formal and phenomenological emphasis into a harsh critique of the military regime.

Frying Chickens: Torture of Political Prisoners

The urge to address the political situation of the time struck Meireles on the day the Pre-Paris Biennial was closed by the Department of Political and Social Order. Boldly signaling the military dictatorship's practice of artistic censorship, this incident compelled him to further engage politics in his work.¹⁴ At the age of twenty-two he created his first work of vehement critique of the regime for Frederico Morais's exhibition *Do Corpo à Terra* (17–21 April 1970), held in the Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. The exhibition became a landmark for its strong works addressing the military regime, including Barrio's *trouxas ensanguentadas* (bloody bundles) (1970).



45. Cildo Meireles, *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* (Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner) (1970). Wooden pole, white cloth, thermometer, ten live chickens, gasoline, fire. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Luiz Alphonsus Guimarães.

No less striking was Meireles's contribution to the exhibition, titled *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* (Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner) (1970) (figure 45). The installation consisted of a wooden stake driven into the ground, with ten live hens tied to it. The stake, approximately 8.2 feet (2.5 meters) in length, had a clinical thermometer attached on top, and a white cloth square surrounded the ground around it. Gasoline was poured on the hens, and they were set on fire.

Carrying references to Afro-Brazilian syncretistic rituals of Candomblé and Umbanda, animal sacrifices were often used in Brazil as a metaphor for the brutality of the regime, as in Manuel's *O bode* (The Goat) and Barrio's *trouxas ensanguentadas*. In *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político*, the act of burning the hens alive was a cruel ritual intended to represent the torture and death of political prisoners. With this work Meireles also drew a parallel between the repressive situation in Brazil at the time and

the harsh conditions of the colonial era; Tiradentes (teeth-puller) was the nom de guerre of Joaquim José da Silva Xavier, the dentist turned martyr of Brazilian independence who was hanged by the Portuguese on 21 April 1792 after being accused of leading a conspiracy movement against the crown.¹⁵ Tiradentes's body was dismembered, and his severed head was displayed in the main square of Ouro Preto, in Minas Gerais, where he had lived. This was one of the most gruesome episodes in Brazilian history, reminiscent of the public beheadings following the French Revolution, the bloody event Foucault deemed the "spectacle of the scaffold."¹⁶ Tiradentes became a national hero, and 21 April became a national holiday commemorating the most important rebellion against the Portuguese during the colonial period. Meireles chose this symbolic date for the enactment of his performance of *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político*. Ironically, the military government sought to celebrate this historic day as well, by sponsoring *Do Corpo à Terra*, the exhibition containing some of the most blatantly and viscerally antiregime works the country had seen to date. According to Meireles, "The figure of Tiradentes was being used by the military regime in a very cynical way. He represented the antithesis of what they stood for. . . . Of course, the hypocrisy of their symbolic maneuvers was clear, and I decided to make a work about this."¹⁷ Meireles's aim was to evoke the past through Tiradentes's ordeal as a way of calling attention to the repressive situation of the present. As his work indicates, despite the different historical contexts a parallel existed between the punishment of Tiradentes and the torture of political prisoners during the military regime.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault shows how after the Enlightenment the public spectacle of the bodies of convicted criminals changed to a different mechanism of control based on discipline, confinement, and surveillance.¹⁸ People who committed crimes previously punished through public torture and ritual disemboweling were now incarcerated in prisons and mental hospitals instead.¹⁹

Though Meireles was not aware of Foucault's writings during the period in question (Foucault's essays were not known in Brazil until the late 1970s and 1980s), Meireles agrees that his work "is not monolithic and is open to many different readings; it invites parallels and comparisons to a broad body of knowledge, including the ideas of Foucault."²⁰ Applying Foucault's analysis, one can see the analogy made by Meireles in *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* between torture as a public spectacle (the dis-

membering of Tiradentes in 1792) and torture as an enclosed and secretive practice (carried out inside Brazilian prisons during the late 1960s and 1970s). The title of the work referred to a historical martyr, but Meireles's goal was to denounce the contemporary torture of political prisoners. His reference was intended not to bring to the present some long-forgotten fact but to evoke cultural memory in relation to the present.

Meireles also claimed that *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* was inspired by the Vietnamese monks who set themselves on fire to protest the Vietnam War: "In *Tiradentes* . . . I was interested in metaphor and in the dislocation of the theme. I wanted to use the subject, life and death, as the raw material for the work. This dislocation is what matters in the history of the art object . . . as a formal object; it evokes memories of self-immolation, or of victims of explosions or napalm attacks. There was all this imagery of war at the time, and I wanted to make reference to this in a way which would bring it attention."²¹ During the performance of *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político*, the thermometer exploded from the heat, making the event even more dramatic and provoking a strong reaction from the conservative community of Minas Gerais.²² The day after the event, top leaders of the Brazilian military government, including President Emílio Garrastazú Médici, went to Ouro Preto for a luncheon—ironically, coq au vin was the dish served—at which one of the politicians made a harsh speech condemning Meireles's work.²³

What remained of *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* after its exhibition, namely, the pole to which the chickens had been tied (figure 46), became a symbol of Meireles's artistic assault on the regime. Usually flags, banners, and vertical poles suggest heroic accomplishments, such as subjugation and conquest. In the case of Meireles, the stake became an anti-nationalist emblem, and the burning chickens represented the brutal use of torture against political prisoners.

Three months after *Do Corpo à Terra* took place, Meireles was scheduled to participate in two exhibitions: *Agnus Dei* at Petite Galerie, Rio de Janeiro (8–17 July 1970), and *Information* at MoMA (2 July–20 September 1970).²⁴ For *Agnus Dei* he created one of his most acutely morbid works to date, a sculpture titled *Introdução a uma nova crítica* (Introduction to a New Criticism) (1970) (figures 47, 48). It was a wooden chair with nails protruding from its seat; the chair was partially covered by a black cloth hanging from an iron frame, as if it were trapped inside a tent. Resembling a macabre tor-



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46. Cildo Meireles, *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* (Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner) (1970). Wooden pole, white cloth, thermometer, ten live chickens, gasoline, fire. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Luiz Alphonsus Guimarães.



47–48. Cildo Meireles, *Introdução a uma nova crítica* (Introduction to a New Criticism) (1970). Wooden chair, nails, netting, and iron frame. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Wilton Montenegro.

ture chamber, the piece alluded to the military regime's practice of torturing its political opponents as a method of interrogation. It also recalled his gruesome installation at *Do Corpo à Terra*.

For his debut on the international art scene at *Information*, however, Meireles tapped into his more conceptual vein, experimenting with less cathartic, more subtle modes of representation that would nevertheless vehemently convey his antiregime position. *Information* stressed the relationship between the written and the visual worlds, placing emphasis on global communication and highlighting a new era in which information itself became an esteemed commodity. Textual and linguistic propositions were part of the lingua franca of conceptual art at the time, and some of Meireles's works that the curator Kynaston McShine had seen at *Salão da Bússola* a year earlier fit the bill. Yet though his work for *Information* was conceptually based, Meireles's practice was never divorced from the political spheres that had originally contextualized it. It therefore became a critical task, especially in light of the major boycott of the X São Paulo Biennial a year earlier, for Meireles to address the regime and at the same time detach himself in the international arena from any possible misunderstanding that he was officially representing Brazil at *Information*.

In his introductory essay for the exhibition catalogue, McShine asked a fundamental question: What kind of art could be significant under repressive circumstances? He wrote,

If you are an artist in Brazil, you know of at least one friend who is being tortured; if you are one in Argentina, you probably have had a neighbor who has been in jail for having long hair, or for not being "dressed" properly; and if you are living in the United States, you may fear that you will be shot at, either in the universities, in your bed, or more formally in Indochina. It may seem too inappropriate, if not absurd, to get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paints from a little tube to a square canvas. What can you as a young artist do that seems relevant and meaningful?²⁵

Examining the intersection of social activism and conceptual practices, *Information* reflected the political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s. MoMA had increasingly come under fire by artists and activists participating in the Art Workers' Coalition, a short-lived organization founded in 1969 to protest the Vietnam War and to promote artists' rights. Antiwar protests and accusations regarding the connections and profitable involvement of

MoMA's trustees in the war industry were among the exhibition's heated subjects.²⁶

Inserções em circuitos ideológicos

(Insertions into Ideological Circuits) (1970)

At *Information* Meireles also turned his work into an instrument of political resistance, creating a system of counterinformation. Increasingly he had begun to experiment with open routes of circulation already in place in society, and how these ideological systems could be used as a vehicle to comment on established power structures, particularly those of the military regime. His interest in these circuits evolved into his next major project, *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos*. In a text dated April 1970 he wrote about some of the issues at play in this series:

- 1) There are in society certain mechanisms of circulation (circuits);
- 2) These circuits send ideological messages from their producer, but at the same time are able to receive back insertions into its circulation;
- 3) and this occurs whenever people initiate them. The *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos* were also created based on two common popular practices: chain letters (those letters that are received, copied, and resent to other people) and the bottles thrown by shipwreck victims into the sea. Implicit in these practices is the notion of a circulation medium, a notion which also applies to money and, metaphorically, to returnable containers, such as recycled bottles.²⁷

The initial project in the series was *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: Projeto Coca-Cola* (Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project) (1970) (see plate 14). For this work, which was first shown in the art circuit in *Information*, Meireles used a silkscreen process with vitreous white ink to transfer text to empty Coca-Cola bottles. He wrote the following message on the bottles: "Inscribe on the bottles critical opinions and send them back into circulation." Carefully devised to match the bottle's logo, the inscriptions were practically invisible when the bottles were empty. The subversive messages became apparent only when the bottles were returned to the factory to be recycled—once they were refilled with Coca-Cola, the writing became legible against the dark liquid. Meireles modified over a thousand bottles and sent them into circulation with political messages, encouraging people to contribute their own statements as well.

Meireles carried the same concept into his next project in the series, *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: Projeto Cédula* (Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Banknote Project) (1970–75). For this series he appropriated *cruselo* bills, the Brazilian currency at the time, and inscribed them with ideological messages, such as “Yankees Go Home” (see plate 15), a clear protest of the U.S. government’s support of dictatorships all over Latin America, and “Down with the Dictatorship”; on some bills he inscribed the names of people who had been victims of the regime.

Meireles was attracted to circuits of exchange that were decentralized and unconstrained, preferring these structures to the closed organization of the art world (museums, galleries, any conventional institutional art spaces). He was not interested in systems of circulation that were subject to surveillance and censorship, such as the mass communication venues of the press, radio, and television.²⁸ The postal system did not interest him either because letters could be controlled and possibly censored by the state.²⁹ *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos* was created out of the need to use a source of exchange that would reach the public without depending on any kind of centralization; therefore, he opted for the open systems of circulation of soda bottles and banknotes.³⁰

While it is true that his appropriation of Coca-Cola bottles and currency has affinities with Warhol’s early work, which shares some of the same iconic images, Meireles was not interested in Pop art per se. He was aware of the work of Pop artists—especially after the São Paulo Biennial of 1967, which had a large roster of American Pop artists—but like many other Brazilian artists at the time, including Barrio and Manuel, Meireles was skeptical of Pop art, especially of Warhol’s work, considering it to be apolitical and celebratory of North American consumerism. Likewise, while he followed in the legacy of Duchamp’s readymades, his work is distinctive for its social and political connotations. Meireles infused his cultural symbols with political overtones, turning them into tools of information. Instead of inserting the readymade into the institutional art space, as Duchamp did before him, Meireles returned the Coca-Cola bottles to their original system of circulation, while at the same time investing them with a different message and a new meaning. Indeed, he argues that his work takes the opposite direction from Duchamp’s readymades: “The *Inserções*,” he said, “would act in the urban environment not as industrial objects set in the place of the artworks but as artworks acting as industrial objects.”³¹

A more fitting model for understanding Meireles’s insertion into open

circuits of exchange can be found in Foucault's writings about how mechanisms of power are constructed in society. In a lecture published in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (1980),³² Foucault discusses how power is disseminated: “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain. . . . Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization . . . individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.”³³ Meireles implicitly understood, in Foucauldian terms, that control is created through a system of relationships spread throughout society and that individuals not only are the passive recipients of this apparatus but also active players, either reiterating it or resisting it. When Foucault writes that mechanisms of power are channeled through the machinery of the state and that “in reality, power in its exercise goes much further, passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as a vehicle for transmitting a wider power,” he speaks to issues at the heart of Meireles's *Inserções*.³⁴ Meireles used his work as an exercise in the “micro-physics of power,” a term coined by Foucault to describe “the dissemination of a dispersed network of apparatuses without a single organizing system, center, or focus, a transverse coordination of disparate institutions and technologies.”³⁵ He introduced his art into circuits that were open to the participation of its receivers, using the system against itself to facilitate the circulation of counterinformation in society, like a virus contaminating networks of exchange. His tactic was to take advantage of a preexisting system of circulation to spread information and provide instructions to the public on how to repeat the process. Some of his Coca-Cola bottles listed the materials used to make a Molotov cocktail—*pavio, fita adesiva, gasolina* (wick, tape, gasoline)—in a clear allusion to the domestic explosives used by students against the police during street riots and by the urban guerrillas in their actions.

One of the most interesting issues brought forth by the series *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos* was not its beginning (the author), its middle (the message), or even its end (the receiver), but its designated social function: it existed to show that there were flaws in the system, flaws which could be used as a form of resistance to criticize the system itself. In today's terms it can be compared to the actions of Internet hackers: though they usually do not have a collective or defined ideological agenda, they nevertheless disrupt the social order so as to reveal its vulnerability. By using the system

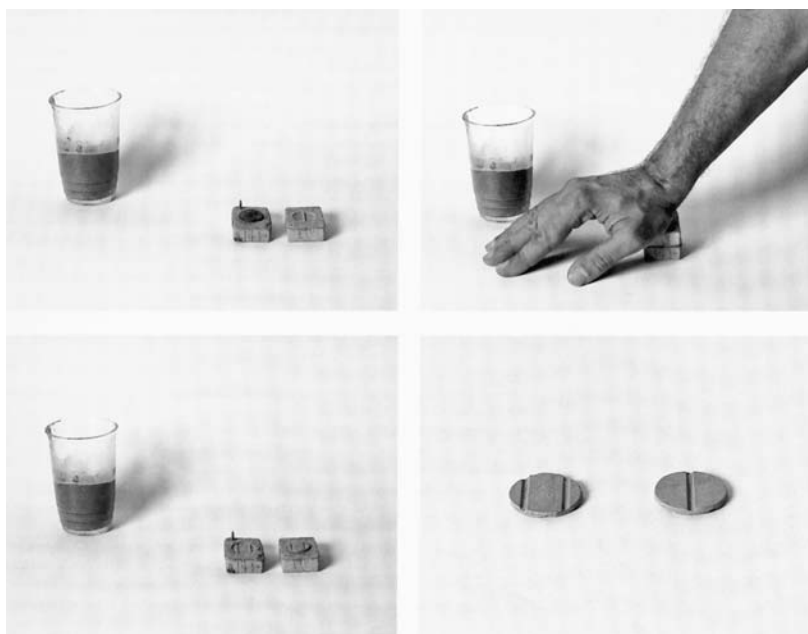
itself and some of its most powerful symbols in capitalist society—the Coca-Cola bottles representing multinational corporations, the banknotes symbolizing capital itself—Meireles found a gap in which to stage resistance.

Meireles claimed that *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos* was basically “a kind of graffiti that circulated,” but he acknowledged that there was nothing stopping participants from using the network of circulating items in a manner that was antithetical to his intentions.³⁶ Anyone who received one of Meireles’s altered bottles could create his or her own message and send it back into circulation. The endless possibilities present in each bottle attested to the open-ended quality of his project.

Inserções em circuitos ideológicos more precisely spoke to a collective need at that time in Brazilian history for a venue in which people could speak their minds without being charged with the authorship of what was being said. Acting more as a facilitator than a creator of a finished work of art, Meireles solicited the collective voice of the many receivers who participated in its circuit. Thus a shift from the individual to the collective took place, and through its circulation the work remained anonymous. Taking a cue from Roland Barthes, who wrote, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author,”³⁷ Meireles’s series implies the death of the artist as the sole originator of the multiple layers of meaning that constitute a work of art, which ultimately will be generated by the many participants in the circuit. In the case of *Projeto Coca-Cola*, for example, it did not matter who was speaking or even what was being said on the recycled bottles. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the reception of his work since no record of the messages inscribed on the bottles by the consumers remains. The critical point, however, is not how or if the recipient chose to participate, but simply that participation and collaboration were encouraged at all.

Ideological Conceptualist, Political Conceptualist, or Just Conceptual?

In 1971, disillusioned with the art circuit, which he found rather naive in its debate of domestic issues, Meireles left Brazil for New York.³⁸ While living in New York, he created another project for the *Inserções* series. *Inserções em circuitos antropológicos* (Insertions into Anthropological Circuits) (1971) (figure 49) were coinlike tokens made out of clay compressed in handmade molds. They approximated the coins used in public telephones and subway tokens.



49. Cildo Meireles, *Inserções em circuitos antropológicos* (Insertions into Anthropological Circuits) (1971). Metal tokens for dispensing machines, telephones, or transport; empty matchboxes; clay. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Pedro Oswaldo Cruz.

The fake tokens implicated those whose hands they fell into, inviting people to take on the role of a hacker, to transgress the norm.

In New York, Meireles became increasingly skeptical of the emerging conceptual art movement, whose works he considered too hermetic and self-involved. He was more inclined to use terms like “anti-art,” as defined by Oiticica, than “conceptual art,” as envisioned by Joseph Kosuth. In Brazil from the late 1960s and early 1970s, the key words were “access” and “participation.” How to create an art with participatory elements? How to eliminate notions of originality and authorship? How to create open, subjective experiences rather than closed, definite works of art? When considering his own work in relation to conceptual art, Meireles stressed the importance of the work’s sensorial presence:

The problem for me as far as so-called Conceptual art is concerned is its aspiration to achieve sensory absence. For me such extreme and painful asepsis results in permanent blindness. It is like a sandwich filled with

sand or cotton, imbued with great desolation. Conceptual art raised the question of time in a place where time should not exist. Unlike cinema or music or literature, the physical art object allows the possibility of immediate attraction or repulsion. Consequently I believe that it is important not to abandon that historically characteristic property of the art object, its instantaneousness.³⁹

Meireles placed as much weight on visibility, formal resolution, and perceptual experience as he did on politics and ideology; if anything, he aimed to combine both parts of the equation: content and form, politics and aesthetics, context and ideology.

Conceptual art is understood as art that conveys an idea or concept, which may exist distinct from and in the absence of its representative object. The term embraces a wide range of artistic practices in which the idea for a work supersedes the finished product.⁴⁰ Conceptual artists investigated the possibilities of art-as-idea and to that end explored linguistic, mathematical, and process-oriented dimensions of thought and aesthetics. The Art and Language group in England and artists such as Kosuth in the United States wrote theoretical essays in favor of the primacy of the idea or its linguistic definition. In some cases, such texts served as the artworks in and of themselves.⁴¹ Like other Latin American conceptualists, Meireles used language as an integral part of his work, especially in the series *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos*, but did not reduce the product of his art to a self-referential linguistic proposition; on the contrary, he used language as a tool to address the political context of the time. He refused to confine the aesthetic construction to a tautological condition, maintaining that art had a social purpose; that view was in opposition to Kosuth's philosophy, which held that "works of art are analytic propositions," that "art consists of the artist's idea of it, and that art can claim no meaning outside itself."⁴² Meireles also stressed ideas and propositions over a finished object of art. Many of his works functioned only as an instruction or a proposition for others to react to or carry out.

In his account of the history of conceptual art, the art historian Benjamin Buchloh criticized Kosuth's narrow demarcation of conceptualism as a tautological, self-reflexive statement. Buchloh extended his narrative of the movement to include post-Duchampian practices in the late 1960s and 1970s, such as the revival of the readymade as a tool to question ideological control and to expose the cultural legitimacy and power exercised by social

institutions.⁴³ In his redefinition of conceptual art, Buchloh embraces the social role of artistic practices. In Meireles's case, there was an emphasis on the social function and role of art in society beyond its autonomous status.

The art historian and curator Mari Carmen Ramírez points out that Latin American conceptualists had a very different agenda from their European and North American counterparts. They saw the possibility of getting away from the tautological model proposed by mainstream conceptual artists by addressing political and social realities in their work.⁴⁴ To distinguish Latin American's version of conceptual art from the mainstream model, Ramírez borrows the term "Ideological Conceptualist," coined by the Spanish art historian Simón Marchán Fiz in 1972 to define Spanish and Argentinean conceptual artists.⁴⁵

The Brazilian psychoanalyst and curator Suely Rolnik disputes this definition and disagrees with the notion that Meireles's practice might be considered under its terms. Rolnik astutely argues that to call Meireles an ideological or political conceptualist "denies the state of estrangement that such a radically new experience produces in our subjectivity."⁴⁶ By insisting on the physicality of the art object and emphasizing its sensorial and participatory elements, Meireles added layers of meaning to his work, moving beyond a practice solely based on verbal discourse or political agenda.

Because of all the elements incorporated into and intertwined within his work—the political, sensorial, participatory, formal, and ideological—finding the right terminology to describe Meireles's practice becomes an intricate enterprise. Proffering a broader understanding of Latin American conceptualism, in *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* Luis Camnitzer compiled many idiosyncratic practices exercised by artists in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America, including body art, performance art, media-based art, and Earth-oriented artworks, among others, and placed them all under the label of conceptualism. Camnitzer's emphasis was not so much on the political or ideological as on visual artistic practices that favored ideas over form. As Camnitzer pointed out, "The periphery couldn't care less about style and produced conceptualist strategies instead."⁴⁷

At the time, official salons and art exhibitions in Brazil did not yet have any classifications for installations, performance, body art, Earth-based artworks, or conceptual art. Indeed, one could say that mediums and movements were evolving at a pace that exceeded critics' and artists' capacity to label them. The regulations of *Salão da Bússola*, for example, stated that

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SALÃO DA BÚSSOLA
A 5 de novembro a 5 de dezembro de 1968
MUSEU DE ARTE MODERNA
Rio de Janeiro, RJ





Nome LILDO MEIRELLES Cidade RJ.

Endereço RUA GENERAL GLICÉRIO 445/1007 LARANJEIRAS
TEL. 2-463343

ATENÇÃO: COMPLETAR O FORMULÁRIO NO VERSO DADOS BIOGRÁFICOS E CURRÍCULO
PRAZO E LOCAL DE ENTREGA DAS OBRAS: ATÉ 10/11/68, MUSEU DE ARTE MODERNA DO RIO DE JANEIRO
ESTA FICHA DEVERÁ ACOMPANHAR OBRIGATORIAMENTE OS TRABALHOS ENVIADOS
SUBMETENDO AO REGULAMENTO DO SALÃO DA BÚSSOLA


Assinatura do artista ou representante

categoria <u>ETC. (11/11/68)</u>	categoria <u>ETC. (11/11/68)</u>	categoria <u>ETC. (11/11/68)</u>
A. DOCUMENTAÇÃO (obra)	B. DOCUMENTAÇÃO (obra)	C. DOCUMENTAÇÃO (obra)
Título da obra	Título da obra	Título da obra
Técnica empregada <u>various</u>	Técnica empregada <u>various</u>	Técnica empregada <u>Paint, Ink, etc.</u>
Dimensões: Horizontal <u>20</u> cm Vertical <u>20</u> cm Profundidade <u>20</u> cm	Dimensões: Horizontal <u>20</u> cm Vertical <u>20</u> cm Profundidade <u>20</u> cm	Dimensões: Horizontal <u>20</u> cm Vertical <u>20</u> cm Profundidade <u>20</u> cm
Valor da obra (R\$) <u>50.000,00</u>	Valor da obra (R\$) <u>50.000,00</u>	Valor da obra (R\$) <u>50.000,00</u>

50. *Salão da Bússola*, ficha de inscrição (Compass Salon, entry form) (1969). Courtesy of Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação / Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro.

artists could submit their works under the categories of painting, drawing, etching, sculpture, or “et cetera.” Since Meireles’s works did not conform to these traditional categories, his pieces were submitted under the humorously vague label “et cetera” (figure 50 on p. 134).

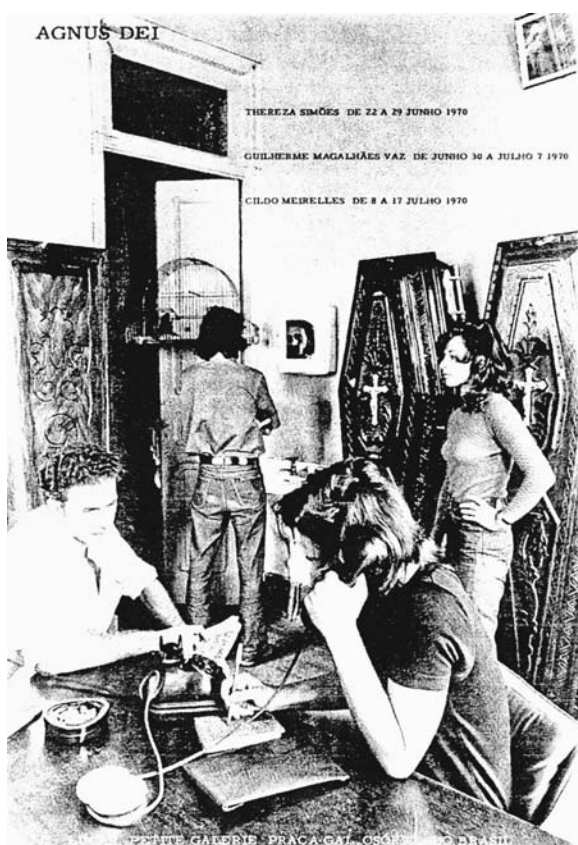
Critical Response: Conceptual Art versus the Regime

In the Brazilian art world of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as in the United States and Europe, artists were challenging not only repressive regimes, but also the role of art institutions, juries, and salons. As an art critic and curator, Frederico Moraes was often called upon to comment on norms of behavior and taste, and to act as the arbiter of salons and exhibitions. In 1970 he responded to the climate of questioning surrounding established criteria of art criticism with a bold move, situating himself as the artist.

In 1970 the Petite Galerie, a small gallery in the neighborhood of Ipanema in Rio de Janeiro, presented *Agnus Dei*, a series of three consecutive exhibitions by Thereza Simões (26–29 June), Guilherme Magalhães Vaz (30 June–7 July), and Meireles (8–17 July). The publicity set the tone for the exhibition: a black-and-white poster (figure 51) depicted the three artists of the series as well as the photographer, Renato Laclete, in a funeral home. In the photograph, Meireles has his back to the spectator, his image reflected in a mirror (an allusion to *Las Meninas* [1656–57] by Diego Velázquez). Laclete is holding a newspaper, Simões appears in profile next to two coffins, and Magalhães Vaz is on the telephone, acting as the owner of the funeral home. The coffins referenced the climate of terror in Brazil.

In addition to three Coca-Cola bottles from the series *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: Projeto Coca-Cola*, Meireles exhibited photographs of *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* as well as the remainder of the actual pole where the chickens were sacrificed. This was also the first time he showed his sinister nail-studded-chair sculpture, *Introdução a uma nova crítica*.

Rather than writing a review of the exhibitions Moraes created an exhibition of his own, called *A Nova Crítica* (The New Criticism). Speaking of the basis for this unconventional response, Moraes wrote, “A deep revision of the critical methodology is necessary. There is a call for poetic criticism. . . . It is no longer possible to make any judgment. The art critic today is an idle professional.”⁴⁸ Moraes’s strategy of shifting places with the artist, who then



51. Poster for exhibition *Agnus Dei* at Petite Galerie (Rio de Janeiro, 1970). Graphic project: Thereza Simões. Photo: Renato Laclete.

shifts places with the spectator, who can also interfere in the work of art, was part of his call for a less authoritarian role for the curator and art critic in the art world.

As he envisioned it, the participation of the public was also implicit in this new mode of art. He believed that “in the artistic guerrilla, everybody is a participant and has to take initiative. Artist, public, and critic are constantly changing positions, and the artist himself can be a victim of an ambush plotted by the spectator.”⁴⁹

For his exhibition Morais filled the gallery with fifteen thousand empty Coca-Cola bottles, donated and transported to the gallery by Coca-Cola’s

official representative and distributor in Brazil (Coca-Cola Refreshments S.A.). Morais covered the floor with the soda bottles, placing a few of Meireles's inscribed bottles interspersed with the regular ones. He also showed photographs of a self-immolating Buddhist Vietnamese monk surrounded by biblical texts from Genesis and Exodus. By placing just a few of Meireles's bottles in a sea of unaltered bottles, Morais was casting aspersions on the ability of Meireles's work to challenge the status quo. Morais had arranged for the official distributor of Coca-Cola to donate thousands of bottles to the exhibition, and Meireles's bottles appeared utterly impotent when juxtaposed with the physical heft of so many bottles. Morais thus created a physical representation of his belief that the system is strong enough to remain undisturbed by Meireles's work.⁵⁰ According to the curator Gerardo Mosquera, "Morais was implying that it is impossible to infiltrate these circuits, as they will always devour you."⁵¹ With his evocative installation, Morais showed, rather than implicitly stated, that Meireles's work was a utopian project, one incapable of being effective. In response to Morais's response to Meireles, Antonio Manuel also intervened in the exhibition *A Nova Crítica* urinating into one of the Coca-Cola bottles in Petite Galerie. Later, Manuel's intervention became the work *Isso é que é* (This is it) (1975), a photograph in which Manuel is seen urinating in a Coca-Cola bottle next to Mário Pedrosa and Jackson Ribeiro.⁵²

In response to the white minimalist paintings of Simões, Morais placed blank canvases inside male restrooms in bars throughout the bohemian neighborhood of Ipanema. The bars' patrons, most of them intellectuals and artists, defaced the canvases with erotic images and strong critiques of the Brazilian president Emílio Garrastazú Médici. Once the canvases were exhibited inside Petite Galerie, the police threatened an invasion; the organizers of the exhibition decided to close the space rather than risk a confrontation.⁵³ *A Nova Crítica* lasted for only four hours.

Morais's exhibition might easily have been considered a stunt, a footnote in the history of Brazilian art. But apart from reflecting the zeitgeist of changing notions and popular misgivings regarding the role of art institutions, art critics, juries, and salons, it also evocatively and memorably raised important questions about the efficacy of artistic practices in responding to a repressive regime.



52. *Malasartes*, no. 3 (April/May/June 1976). Photo: Miguel Rio Branco.

The Short-Lived *Malasartes* Magazine

Responding to these questions of the efficacy of objects of art, a group of eight artists and one art critic, Ronaldo Brito, from Rio and São Paulo created the magazine *Malasartes* in 1975 (figure 52). The journal—whose title can be read as a combination of the Portuguese words *malas* (suitcases) and *artes* (arts) or as a melding of the Portuguese words *mal* (bad), *as* (to the), and *artes* (arts)—aimed to promote debate, to evaluate the recent production of Brazilian contemporary art, and to discuss a variety of subjects ranging from issues on regionalism to the latest trends in the visual arts, including conceptual art. Despite the brevity of its existence (only three issues between September 1975 and June 1976) and its relatively small run of five thousand copies per edition, the magazine became one of the most celebrated artists' journals published in Brazil during the mid-1970s.

An editorial in the magazine's first issue stated that it would be about "the politics of the arts." Meireles helped to create the magazine and was also one of its editors.⁵⁴ Published in Rio de Janeiro, *Malasartes* had an interdisciplinary approach, mainly focusing on the visual arts but also including essays on film, architecture, design, sculpture, and poetry as well as discussions on geopolitics, such as the Indians' rights movement. In addition to essays by its editors and guest writers, the journal invited artists to develop

specific projects for the magazine. It also published translations of international articles by Joseph Kosuth and Allan Kaprow, among others; Kosuth's essay "Art after Philosophy" (1969) was translated by Ronaldo Brito and published in the first issue (September–November 1975).⁵⁵

Brito opened the first issue of *Malasartes* with the essay "Análise do circuito" (Circuit Analysis), in which he analyzes the intricate relationship of contemporary art production with the market and advocates for practices that would exist outside the predominant art circuit yet could still maintain a critical discourse and have a social efficacy. In the same issue Meireles published works that had been overlooked, including pieces by Umberto Costa Barros, Luiz Fonseca, Alfredo Fontes, Cláudio Paiva, Vicente Pereira, Tunga, and Guilherme Magalhães Vaz as well as Meireles's own series *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: Projeto Coca-Cola* and *Inserções em circuitos antropológicos*. Most of the theoretical writings that appeared in the magazine agreed that Brazilian contemporary art was fragmented in its many endeavors and that a lack of continuity made it impossible to construct linear narratives; in the second issue (December–February 1976) excerpts from Carlos Zilio's book *A querela do Brasil* (The Quarrel of Brazil)⁵⁶ posited that this situation would continue unless an alternative could be found to the foreign models determined by the dominant centers of culture. The third and final issue (April–June 1976) featured a translation of Kaprow's "The Education of the Un-Artist," written in 1969 and published two years later in *Art News*, in which the originator of the happening dwells on the implications of such terms as "non-art," "anti-art," and "ART-art" and concludes that ultimately everything is art: "Context instead of category, flux in place of the work of art." Kaprow's insistence on the openness of the concept of art had positive repercussions for artists and intellectuals involved with *Malasartes*.

After the publication of the third issue of *Malasartes* its nine editors could no longer agree on what direction the magazine should take in the future: one group wanted it to be a general vehicle for cultural information, in order to make it more financially viable; the other wanted it to continue in a more theoretical vein based in scholarly pursuits and artists' projects. They could not reach a consensus, and the magazine was discontinued after the decisive split of its editorial founders. It was a successful enterprise from an intellectual and artistic point of view, but it could not survive on its limited funds and circulation.

“Quem Matou Herzog?” (Who Killed Herzog?) (1975)

Also in 1975 Meireles revisited *Projeto Cédula* (Banknote Project) to protest the alleged assassination of the journalist Vladimir Herzog. Vlado, as he was known, was the director of the department of journalism of TV Cultura in São Paulo, a journalist, and the former editor of the magazine *Visão*. On 25 October 1975 he was accused of subversion, arrested, and tortured to death with electroshocks that same day in a prison in São Paulo. The official explanation for his death, which no one believed, was that after confessing allegiance to the Communist Party, Herzog had hung himself from the bar of his cell, using his coverall belt (though the inmates’ coveralls did not have belts). Some journalists who were incarcerated with Herzog affirmed that he had died from the torture administered by military officials.⁵⁷ According to Jewish tradition, Herzog would have to be buried in a special area of the cemetery reserved for victims of suicide. But disputing the claims of the military authorities, Rabbi Henri Sobel of São Paulo refused to bury Herzog in the reserved area, thereby reinforcing the widespread belief that he was violently murdered and had not committed suicide.⁵⁸

In a reaction to the political events, Meireles stamped banknotes with the inscription “Quem Matou Herzog?” (Who Killed Herzog?) (1975) (figure 53). In asking “Who Killed Herzog?” Meireles was not really formulating a question but was rather positing a rhetorical proposition underlining the fact that the official explanation given by the government was falsely generated to mask the real causes of Herzog’s death. As Paulo Herkenhoff has pointed out, Meireles’s question was uncomfortable to the regime as well as to an intimidated public. With their provocative messages, Meireles’s banknotes did not last long in the hands of the recipient; people would neither keep them in their pockets nor rip them up, so they kept circulating quickly.⁵⁹

Yet some issues concerning the reception of Meireles’s work have to be addressed. Who knew who Herzog was, and the circumstances of his death? In truth it was only a very small, well-informed, and privileged sector of the population, one with access to leftist publications that, despite censorship, managed to publish reports of the victims of the military regime. The press, including popular venues such as major newspapers, television, and radio stations, was still censored at the time, and a large segment of Brazilian society was probably unaware of Herzog’s plight. Therefore, while Meireles’s work participated in an open, nonelitist system of distribution and circulation, his message was still dependent on the recipient’s level of understand-



53. Cildo Meireles, *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: Projeto Cédula* (Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Banknote Project) (1975). Rubber stamp on banknote. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Pedro Oswaldo Cruz.

ing, restricted to the liberal, middle-class spectator, which in its limitations is problematic.

It is unknown who the actual recipients of Meireles's work were and unlikely that most people who received the banknotes or the bottles of Coca-Cola recognized them as objects of art. Given the tiny percentage of bottles actually inscribed relative to the total distribution of the unadulterated product in the market (according to the artist about one thousand bottles inscribed with his initials were recycled), it is uncertain how many of them survived, since their inherent nature was to keep circling within the system. Ultimately those remaining became highly collectible items. (Morais, for instance, owns a Meireles Coca-Cola bottle, as do some private collectors and museums.)

In his writings Meireles points out some crucial issues regarding the consumption and reception of the *Inserções*. According to him, "The work only exists to the extent that other people participate in it. What also arises is the need for anonymity. By extension, the question of anonymity involves the question of ownership. When the object of art becomes a practice, it be-

comes something over which you can have no control or ownership.”⁶⁰ The *Inserções* defy traditional models of ownership and of presentation since the works are not only intended to be “exhibited” per se, but also to become actively engaged with the viewer in the sphere of circulation.⁶¹ When the work does not take place in the closed circuit of the art world, in which the receiver is usually a dealer, a buyer, or a collector, it raises questions of ownership: Who possesses a work that is doomed to continue circulating in the system?

Meireles asserted that he never sold works from the *Inserções* series. For him, these works were relevant only within the historical moment in which they were made.⁶² The artist agreed, however, that his work cannot escape the dynamics of the art market and that he cannot prevent it from being sold by dealers, collectors, and art institutions.⁶³ As much as Meireles’s Coca-Cola bottles participated in the open circuit, they were at the same time presented as works of art in exhibitions such as *Information* and *Agnus Dei* and therefore commodified through their insertion into the art circuit.

These dynamics of the art world forced the question of the value of Meireles’s work, regardless of his own stance on the issue. How much is it worth? What is the relationship between its exchange value and its use value? How much does the consumer pay for a bottle of soda? And how much would the art market pay for one of Meireles’s Coca-Cola bottles? for one of his banknotes? These issues were already at play in some of Meireles’s works: an installation of 1969 entitled *Árvore do dinheiro* (Money Tree) (1969) (figure 54), for instance, comprised a bundle of one hundred one-cruzeiro notes tied up with two elastic bands and placed on a white pedestal base. When it was first shown publicly, its asking price was two thousand cruzeiros, twenty times its actual value, calling attention to the discrepancy between use value and exchange value.⁶⁴ (Since cruzeiro banknotes are no longer the Brazilian currency, their use value is null; the work’s exchange value, on the other hand, keeps increasing as Meireles’s fame and recognition rise.) Meireles would continue playing with notions of money, worth, and exchange rates through his career. In a project entitled *Zero cruzeiro* (1974–78), he created false cruzeiro bills, swapping the images of politicians and national heroes for the image of a native Indian from the Kraô tribe on one side and that of a mentally ill patient on the other. These bills were worth nothing—a compelling reminder of the lack of value placed by society in the marginal groups stamped on them.

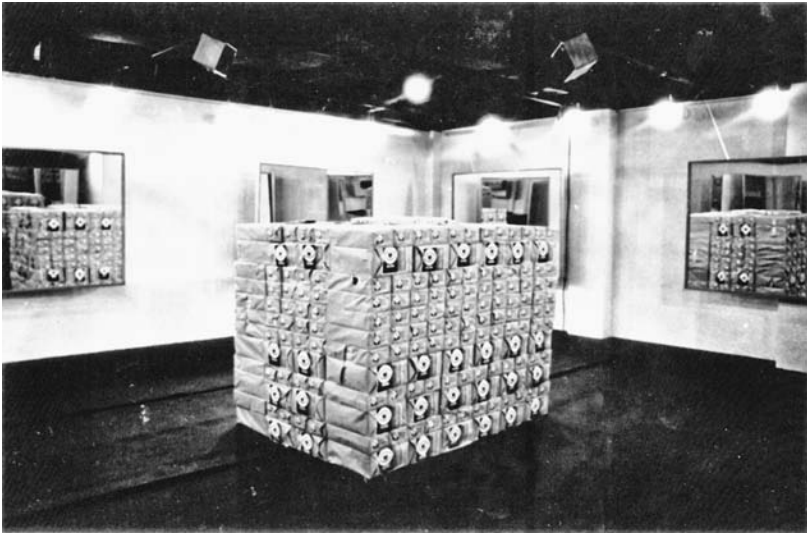


54. Cildo Meireles, *Árvore do dinheiro* (Money Tree) (1969). One hundred folded one-cruzeiro banknotes. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Wilton Montenegro.

The Danger of Potential Fire

While working on the series *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos*, a work that goes beyond the boundaries of institutional art spaces, Meireles was also searching for a commercial gallery to exhibit an installation with a performance component that directly referenced the climate of fear and terror instilled by the military regime. Because of the nature of this work, it had been refused by a gallery in São Paulo and another in Rio de Janeiro.⁶⁵ Meireles conceived of the project in 1973, but it took him six years to bring it to fruition. The installation finally took place in 1979—the year when amnesty was granted to political opponents of the regime—in a small university gallery, Cândido Mendes, in the affluent neighborhood of Ipanema in Rio de Janeiro.

The sole work in the exhibition, *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux) (1973–79) (figure 55), was a display of 126,000 matchboxes bearing the brand name “Fiat-Lux,” the most popular brand of matches in Brazil.⁶⁶ The matchboxes were stacked in a large cube in the center of the gallery. Upon entering the exhibition, the spectator felt his feet



55. Cildo Meireles, *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux) (1973–79). 126,000 matchboxes, sandpaper, eight mirrors with transfers of the beatitudes (from the Sermon of the Mount in the gospel of Matthew 5:3–12). Installation view at Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes (Rio de Janeiro, 1979). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Luiz Alphonsus Guimarães.

scratching the black sandpaper that covered the floor, mimicking the sound of something burning and generating fear of a potential fire. Eight mirrors were placed on the walls, and the installation was surrounded by five actors dressed as bodyguards wearing suits and dark glasses (figure 56); they were supposedly there to prevent the visitors from touching the matches because that could ignite an explosion. The presence of the faux bodyguards created a sinister atmosphere because they resembled undercover agents from the DOPS, known as the political police.

The situation got out of control when the public actually started touching the matchboxes. The bogus security guards were forced to call a real police patrol to evacuate the gallery. Letters of protest were sent to local newspapers. Among them was one by the Brazilian art dealer Afonso Henrique Ramos Costa, entitled “Mau Gosto” (Bad Taste), in which he called *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* “a cultural aggression toward the public.”⁶⁷ In describing the event, Costa wrote, “When entering the gallery the public saw a text asking them to sit down because something imminent was about to



56. Cildo Meireles, *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux) (1973–79). Installation view at Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes; shown: five actors posing as bodyguards (Rio de Janeiro, 1979). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Luiz Alphonsus Guimarães.

happen.”⁶⁸ According to Costa, “The actual terror came from the ‘gorillas’ dressed like phony security guards who started to use violence to expel whoever tried to touch the matchboxes.”⁶⁹ Meireles did not plan to go to the opening of the event, but he was called in because of the emergency and rushed to the gallery.⁷⁰ After the artist arrived, the situation calmed down, but nevertheless many policemen were already inside the gallery, and they left only after the dean of the university interfered.⁷¹ *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* was supposed to last a full day but lasted only a few hours. The cryptic reference to an imminent event, the transformation of the space into a fire hazard, the aggressive presence of the phony security guards—everything in the performance worked as a metaphor of the fear Brazilian society was experiencing at the time. It was a comment on the state of violence which characterized Brazilian life during the military regime.⁷²

Using the language of metaphor, Meireles created some of the strongest works of art during the military regime. In the late 1960s and early 1970s he mirrored the brutal, barbaric aspects of the dictatorship with sensational

works utilizing lurid imagery, such as *Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político* and *Introdução a uma nova crítica*. When the regime intensified its repression and it was no longer possible to openly criticize it, Meireles used his acute sensibility to create the series *Inserções em circuitos ideológicos*, in which authorship and therefore the danger of persecution were no longer attached to the work. Later on, in *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* he was able to stirringly recreate the implicit sensations of fear, insecurity, and danger that were such tangible realities at the time.

Through the many anonymous voices that participated in his circulating artworks, Meireles managed to generate a counterpropaganda circuit for messages that gave voice to opposition to the military regime; through his evocative installations and interventions in space he was able to directly denounce the climate of intimidation that dominated the times as well. In the face of this situation, he created art that ignited a spark while at the same time allowing him to fade away into a web of clandestine messages.